Israel and Iran at the Crossroads: Geopolitical Implications of Rising Tensions in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Israel-Iran war has become one of the most categorical geopolitical battles in the modern Middle East transforming regional alliances, security policies and power structure. The conflict has been escalated by ideological differences, security interests and regional ambitions of dominance through proxy wars, cyber wars and covert operations. The latest rises have challenged the neighboring states and global powers to reconsider their diplomatic and military standpoints, and this aspect has helped to introduce the new trends of collaboration and conflicts in the region. In particular, the Gulf countries are revisiting their foreign policies due to the changing threats and the new opportunities. The war also contributes to larger Middle Eastern concerns, such as the Palestinian quandary, sectarian distinctions, and US-China strategic rivalry, therefore, affecting the future regional stability. The changing Israel Iran confrontation needs to be understood in the process of examining future geopolitical relations, and finding the way to the conflict mitigation.

Keywords: *Israel–Iran Rivalry, Middle East Geopolitics, Regional Security, Proxy Warfare, Strategic Alliances*

Introduction

The conflict between Israel and Iran has turned out to be one of the most important and complicated geopolitical confrontations in the Middle East. The conflict is based on ideological, geopolitical and religious tensions hence the implication of the historical legacies and opposing national interests. Since the Islamic Revolution that took place in Iran in 1979 and which resulted in significant change within the foreign policy of that country, up to the current nuclear stand-offs and proxy wars in the Middle East region, Israel and Iran have been in conflict in virtually all aspects of politics in the Middle East. It was a turning point in the history of the region when Iran went through a revolution and instead of the relatively

secular and western oriented monarch Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi the country became dominated by Ayatollah Khomeini who promised an Islamic Republic and was hardcore in declaring anti Israel and anti Western rhetoric (Zarif, 2003). This transition led to a fundamental clash of ideologies between the two countries placing them as arch enemies in the region. Their conflict has since been extended over the decades past to become a bilateral conflict, affecting not only direct relations between them but also the region as different state and non-state actors position themselves either in support or in opposition of either of the countries. The general effects of this rivalry are especially substantial, since it also affects the balance of political powers in neighboring states, makes proxy wars, and affects the political stability of the region. With the tensions on the rise, the stakes becoming greater, it is important to learn more about the development of this conflict and how it can affect the regional security as well as alliances.

The study problem of this research is to understand how Israeli-Iranian conflict redraws regional alliances, regional security structures and power balances in the Middle East. Investigating the past and the present processes of such a conflict, the paper is to evaluate the possible outcomes of its future. The aim is to determine how the current tensions between Israel and Iran affects other regional conflicts especially in the occurrence of new coalitions, re-organization of political interests, and emergence of proxy wars. Such shifts affect not only Israel and Iran but also other states such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other players in the region because their security policies are immensely influenced by this conflict. This discussion will also focus on the possibility of deterioration in the future especially when it comes to the nuclear ambitions by the Iranian government and the participation of the other global powers like the U.S, Russia and China. No less significant will be the consideration of the routes to de-escalation, which are also crucial to avoiding an even larger regional conflict. A qualitative approach will be utilized in the study and secondary research will be done through use of past records, policy papers, expert views and case studies to give a detailed picture of how the Israel Iran conflict influences the Middle Eastern geopolitics (Keddie, 2006). Analyzing these aspects, the study will provide some bits of information on how this conflict determines the security of the Middle East, and what could be done later to prevent the dangers of further development of tensions.

Historical Context

Israel and Iran had a rather cordial relationship prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution due to the geopolitical interests of both countries and the shared interest by the Arab states in the Middle East. Iran, under the reign of

Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was the most strategic ally of Israel in the region and far more influential in the politics of Middle East. It is during this period that Israel and Iran had a great relation as far as coordinating military and intelligence relations are concerned. Israel sought the support (logistical and diplomatic) of Iran in its security requirements and in turn Israel was instrumental in assisting Iran in developing its military and intelligence capabilities and this led to Iran becoming a growing power in the region (Zarif, 2003). This relationship was mainly motivated by the necessity to oppose the common enemy of Arab nationalism especially that posed by such countries like Egypt and Iraq which were perceived to be hostile towards both Israel and Iran. They both worked together as they tried to keep the Arab influence in check in the region and this was beneficial to both forces as they positioned themselves against the Arab unity and revolution force that was sweeping the region.

Yet, such collaboration became altered in the 1979 Iranian Revolution that led to the fall of the Pahlavism monarchy, and the creation of the Islamic Republic that was led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The revolution basically changed the Iranian foreign policy especially toward Israel. During the leadership of Khomeini, Iran transformed to become an Islamic Republic (which is ideologically bound to fight against Israel) and it was less pro-Western and much more secular. The government of Khomeini took a specific anti-Israel position, in whose basis there were not only ideological but also religious beliefs. The new leadership in Iran tried to present Israel as an usurper of the land of the Palestinians and an instrument of Western imperialism. The shift in ideologies caused the breakup of the established good diplomatic and military relationships between the two countries. Hardly had replaced cooperation by Iran foreign policy that was focusing on assisting Islamic nationalist movements and militant organizations hostile to Israel, including Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as Hamas in Palestine territories (Keddie, 2006). This radical policy shift was to become the start of a sour competition that would define the Middle East geopolitical scene over many decades.

Due to such ideological shift, the Israeli-Iranian relationship soon went south and the hatred between the two nations exponentially increased. The leaders of Iran have not only accused Israel of the existence but also urged total destruction of the Israeli nation. This new attitude was not merely a matter of rhetoric change, Iran took an active role in supporting a number of militant organizations with the aim of fighting Israel. By sponsoring Hezbollah, Hamas and other organizations, Iran wanted to compete with Israeli influence in the Middle East through causing and sponsoring proxy wars in Lebanon, Gaza and elsewhere. The competition that existed

between Israel and Iran was also heightened by a certain number of flashpoints which were critical to the rivalry that existed between the two countries which were the nuclear program of Iran which was a major tension to the two countries. The fear that Israel had about the nuclear ambitions of Iran (more specifically, the fear that Iran might end up with nuclear weapons) was still a key point. This paranoia resulted in secret military action aimed at the disruption of the nuclear program of Iran such as the famous Stuxnet cyberattack in 2010 against Iranian uranium enrichment site at Natanz. This Internet-based act of war was suggested to be of Israeli and the US and was also part of a wider plan to postpone the Iran nuclear weapons program, and was one of the first major instances of cyber warfare serving as a tool of statecraft (Sanger, 2012). These and the assassinations of Iran nuclear scientists were further used to deepen enmity and ideological gap between Israel and Iran. With this accumulation of tensions, they were at the heart of development of the geopolitics of the Middle East leading to the emergence of proxy war and position of regional powers on either sides (Chubin, 2010).

The existing animosity between Israel and Iran has further worsened in the decades. The warfare no longer involves territorial clashes or geopolitical games but has undergone as an ideological war in the region. The Iranian government has always offered itself as the voice of the Palestinian cause and an anti-Israeli resistance leader and has opposed Israel in many aspects through its Western-aligned policies. This ideological and military competition has produced enduring effects in the Middle East and it has affected the establishment of new regional alliances, the increase of proxy wars, and the emergence of new military and security threats. This rivalry plus the continuous instability in the region keeps making the Middle East one of the most volatile regions in the world.

Geopolitical Implications

The Israel Iran conflict closely correlates with the changing alliances in the Middle East where nations have started to form alliances depending on their stands on this conflict. An example is Iran which has established a coalition called the Axis of Resistance which included Syria, Hezbollah and the rebels in Yemen, the Houthi rebels. This relationship is a component of a wider Iranian plan to overshadow the influence of Israel in the region as well as that of Israel allies, especially the United States and Saudi Arabia (Mabon, 2016). It is through transfer of political, military and financial assistance to these groups that Iran has been able to increase its sphere of influence and become a threat to Israeli security. Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based organization has become one of the sharper proxies of Iran, with the Houthis in Yemen effectively undermining Saudi-supported interests, which makes the security situation in the Arabian Peninsula even

harder to understand. This coalition will enable Iran to exert its influence on various fronts, including the Mediterranean, the Arabian Sea, and this makes the situation as Israel is surrounded by enemies who share the same ideological position as it does.

Conversely, Israel has also intensified its relationship with the Gulf countries, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, particularly after the normalization of the terms in 2020. The agreements were a historical turning point in Middle East geopolitics representing a larger regional perk in normalization between Israel and some Arab countries. In this part, UAE and Bahrain, in particular, gave preference to economic and security cooperation with Israel despite the fact that these countries traditionally spoke on behalf of the Palestinian cause. The increasing collaboration is also related to the mutual interest in the Iranian nuclear interests and its regional behaviors, as these Gulf countries have felt threatened by the rise of Iranian influence on their security and stability (Sengupta, 2021). Abraham Accords are a clear change in Middle Eastern politics, where old enmities are being transformed into security coalitions of convenience. These new alliances have completely altered the balance of power in the region with Israel, who was previously alone in the region, in a special situation of increasing collaboration with the strong Arab nations. The Palestinian issue has been left behind and the struggle now is to counter the influence of Iran which has led to changes of the security profile of the region.

The Abraham Accords signing can be viewed as a paradigm shift in not only Israeli relations with the Arab world but also in the entire geopolitics in the Middle East. The Israel/These Gulf states deal is a pragmatic way of finding a solution to regional security and cooperation especially with their joint concerns over Iran ambitions. The driving force in building these new alliances is the concern and intention of Israel and the Gulf states, represented by the UAE and Bahrain, which is to oppose the Iranian influence in the region (Gazit, 2021). This shift has given a new meaning to the Middle Eastern security as Israel and the neighboring Arab countries have never collaborated the way they do now. Nevertheless, this has further created some tensions in the region. Iran, in its turn, has been in a shock over the normalization of the Israel Arab relations, considering it as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and a threat to its own regional policy directly. The Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon proxy war are therefore arenas of these competing alliances. Iran and Israel have both tried to widen their influence in these regions using military, political, and economic forces, and this has only triggered the ongoing conflicts and made the environment unstable, where peace is far and away (Cohen, 2020). These proxy conflicts, and the general enmity between Israel and Iran, keep on defining

the security structure of the Middle East reflecting the region is highly volatile and constantly changing geopolitical environment.

Security and Military Dynamics

The implications of the Israel Iran conflict on security are enormous in the context of nuclear threats, cyber warfare and conventional military conflicts. One of the most disputable questions of the conflict is the Iranian nuclear program that causes apprehensiveness among the leadership of Israel because of the possibility of Iran using nuclear weapons. The policy of this country Israel has been to not allow Iran to attain nuclear status using some forms that include use of diplomacy, sanctions and military force. This has resulted in a lot of occurrences with the latest being the Israeli airstrike on the nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007 which was said to have been constructed with the help of the Iranians (Lynch, 2010). The preemptive strike policy of Israel and specifically its intentions against the nuclear goals of Iran, has not changed and has been the foundation of the Israeli defense policy and resulted in a typical policy of military preparedness in the event that a direct action needs to be taken (Biddle, 2020).

Secondly, along with the nuclear problem, cyber warfare has become one of the key instruments of Israel-Iran conflict. One of the most famous examples of the cyber warfare between the two countries is the Stuxnet cyberattack that occurred in 2010 and targeted the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in Iran. The attack targeted key elements of Iranian nuclear program as a result of which Iran slowed down its nuclear weapons development program (Sanger, 2012). Both Israel and Iran have ever since resorted to cyberattacks against the critical infrastructure of each other. Traditional military threats also exist, and both countries have a large number of missiles and developed air defense systems. Another twist to the conflict has been the increased use of drones in warfare as both parties have used the arsenal to provide surveillance, air strikes, and counter-surveillance (Biddle, 2020). Such security realities are bound to define the military situation in the Middle East in the foreseeable future (Friedman, 2018).

Economic and Humanitarian Effect

Israel-Iran tussle has also carried both economic and humanitarian consequences especially on Iran. International sanctions imposed due to the fear of Iranian nuclear program and interventions, has devastated the economy of Iran. Such sanctions, in especially the ones by the United States and the European Union, have paralyzed the capacity of Iran to conduct international trade and to deal with the global financial system (Ehteshami & Nejad, 2019). Consequently, Iran has been unable to grow its economy and its local industries have lost a lot especially the oil and gas

sector (Katzman, 2020). The Iranian economic crisis has also spilled over to the region since Iran has not been able to fund proxy forces and partners as much as it used to before, its capability to project its power has also been hampered (Kurdoglu, 2016).

In the humanitarian sector, the current war has led to a high level of insecurity in the area. Thousands of civilians have been killed and huge refugee problems have emerged as a result of the proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. In Syria, Iran has backed the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, leading to a long-lasting civil war that led to the displacement of millions of people and their suffering (Chatham House, 2020). Likewise, the war in Yemen, in which Iran has backed the Houthi rebels, has led to one of the worst crises in the world with tens of thousand people killed and millions more starving and dying of diseases (Chatham House, 2020). Israel and Iran conflict, which has contributed to such proxy wars, has created more instability in the region, causing economic and human suffering to often-devastating degrees that pose a serious danger to security and development of the entire Middle East (Mabon, 2016).

Future Scenarios and Pathways to De-escalation

In prospect, the Israel-Iran conflict has become a severe crossroad in a more comprehensive geopolitical process in the Middle East with high stakes of continuing to deteriorate. The threat of direct military combat is one of the most urgent issues, especially given the fact that Israel has never stopped its tendency to ensure that Iran does not gain nuclear bombs. Israel has persistently reiterated its determination to make sure that Iran never gets to develop nuclear weapons and this is presented by Israel as a vital interest in national security. In this regard, Israel has kept its military prepared to a high degree, such as coming up with preemptive strike policies that could be employed to attack the nuclear facilities in Iran (Biddle, 2020). The direct military confrontation is also fuelled by the tensions that currently revolve around the nuclear program of Iran. Iran has enriched its uranium, has ballistic missile program, and is pursuing newer military technology which is why Israel feels threatened with existential threat. This is made worse by the fact that various powers across the world are involved and this complicates the dynamics. The U.S. has long been an ally of Israel consistently engaged in diplomacy to constrain the Iranian nuclear program including the negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The diplomatic attempts to suppress Iranian nuclear ambitions have, however, been jeopardized by the withdrawal of the U.S. out of the agreement in 2018 and the re-imposition of tough sanctions, which puts the risks of military confrontation to higher levels (Katzman, 2020). The nature of the relationships between Russia and Iran and the latter in the context of military activity in Syria and supporting the

Iranian regime has become another source of tension, and this makes it more complicated to reach de-escalation. In this regard, the possibility of the military escalation is a major issue, and Israel is likely to use the military force as an option of guaranteeing its national security mainly in case that the diplomacy cannot stop the military capabilities of Iran.

Nevertheless, even in the face of the danger of the military clash, diplomatic efforts are also essential in preventing the further rise of the conflict and in regulating the tension that leads to the conflict between Israel and Iran. The nuclear issue is to be solved with multilateral diplomacy which can solve the problem and the risk of military actions. One of the most notable approaches to tackling the issue of nuclear ambitions of Iran through peaceful means is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations even though these talks have stalled following the decision of the U.S. to pull out of the agreement. Despite the severe drawbacks in the situation with the JCPOA, its restoration can still be considered a feasible solution to de-escalation since it will create a platform where all international forces, including the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and China, can cooperate to develop a peaceful solution. The United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other related multi-lateral forums also play the essential role in monitoring compliance and overseeing nuclear non-proliferation agreements. But the entrenchment of both Israel and Iran is a major setback to a successful diplomatic interaction. The future of Israel is also non-negotiable as regards its concern with the nuclear ambitions of Iran and its proxy groups in the region that threaten Israeli security directly. On the other hand, Iran considers growth of its nuclear project as an issue of national sovereignty and security. Therefore, the search of a common ground between the two countries should not ignore the nuclear problem but focus as well on the overall regional security relationships that shape the conflict. Nevertheless, diplomacy is still the best available de-escalation option since both of the parties stand to suffer devastating outcomes in the case of direct military confrontation. The multilateral efforts to resolve the wider regional problems together with diplomatic interaction may offer the right platform to solve the problem peacefully.

The issue of the stability of the Middle East is not only related to the problem of conflict among Israel and Iran but also to the issue of dealing with greater regional power balances and security structure. The increasing role of Iran in the region especially its sponsorship of proxy organizations like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and other militias in Syria have transformed the security situation in the region and have been in conflict with Israeli interests in many cases. These proxy wars have emerged as one of the main frontiers towards the Israel v Iran rivalry where

both nations are fighting to expand their influence in strategic regions. Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon have become the grounds of proxy wars, which contributed to the years-long destabilization of these countries, and millions of their citizens became casualties of both direct and indirect effects of the conflicts (Chatham House, 2020). The normalization of the relations between Israel and some Arab countries, especially via the Abraham Accords has however brought about a new direction in the region. The signing of such agreements by Israel and the UAE and Bahrain indicates their joint anxiety in rising Iranian power and the nuclear needs of Iran in the region. This change of regional alliances, with security and economic cooperation with Israel taking precedence to previous positions on the Palestinian issue, might open space to a larger regional alliance allowing to tackle the Iran-Israel conflict in a more productive way (Sengupta, 2021). As much as the Israeli-Iranian rivalry has remained topical, this changing diplomatic environment may present new opportunities of cooperation between Arab countries, Israel and even Iran which may result into a more stable and cooperative Middle East. Nevertheless, long-run stability cannot be achieved solely by means of diplomatic efforts because it will also involve regional cooperation to ensure military and security dynamics. There is always a need to ensure an inclusive dialogue that reinforces the main causes of war and brings peace and stability in the future of the Middle East as regional players cope with the changing political landscape (Friedman, 2018).

Conclusion

The Israel-Iran conflict is one of the most powerful factors of geopolitical instability in the Middle East and it defines not only the immediate relations between Israel and Iran, but the overall power distribution in the region. This is an ideological, religious, and geopolitical conflict that has deep roots but has now become more of a bilateral conflict that spans more international fronts through direct and indirect confrontations. These tensions, however, have taken many forms over the decades, including military conflicts, secret operations, and proxy wars, especially in such states as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The increasing role of the international powers such as the United States, Russia, and China has made the situation more complex where all the actors have either taken the side of Iran or Israel with regard to their strategic goals. Such an on-going conflict has not only jeopardized the security of the region but also led to complex security issues that shape the course of wider Middle Eastern politics. With the rising tensions, the threats of a bigger and more destructive war process are eminent, which will destabilize the whole region and erode the attempts at peace and collaboration.

Nevertheless, against all the odds, new developments, including the Abraham Accords, have witnessed the emergence of a new dynamic in the region. These agreements are a major change in the history of the region, with a number of Arab countries shifting towards normalization of their relations with Israel, abandoning the long-standing Arab policy of refusal to remember the Jewish nation. The shifting alliances give an indication of how an avenue towards de-escalation might be possible since the nations in the region are starting to focus on the need to cooperate on security issues, economic progress, and acts against Iranian hegemony. Although the issue of the Israel-Iran conflict is still one of the main pillars of the Middle Eastern geopolitics, the changing dynamics of the relations can be viewed as a sign of hope. In the future, the destiny of the region will largely rely on how regional players supported by international powers would be able to communicate in a constructive dialogue, to find multilateral solutions and to combat the roots of the Israel-Iran conflict. The road to regional stability will require a commitment to compromise, strategic patience, and a long-term vision of peaceful coexistence, where security and sovereignty are respected, and the specter of conflict no longer dominates the Middle East. Despite the numerous obstacles, there remains the possibility for a more peaceful and cooperative future, should the region's leaders heed the lessons of past conflicts and choose diplomacy over warfare.

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